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TENNYSON AND DEATH

Tennyson's life is the type of quiet English existence. Penury did not drive him along strange ways and among false hearts, as it drove a Scotch ploughboy who had the tongue of a poet; passion did not possess him until his life became "the pageant of a bleeding heart," as it possessed an English lord who had the gift of fiery song; disease did not cut him off untimely, as it cut off an English youth whose hymn of truth and beauty was beginning to be raised in stately measure. Shelter from the ruder shocks of circumstances was his; friends were his; long life was his. It is easy to view him as the peaceful poet of peaceful England, to think of him as of one who was spared the tumult, who never stood face to face with the enemy.

Yet not all enemies are material, not all battles are waged with blood and iron. In the still spaces and deep reaches of the mind is place for stubborn struggles of momentous issue, and Tennyson's life, quiet as it was, knew conflict, if not of the flesh, then of the spirit. He had an enemy—an ancient disturber of the minds of men. In life there is death. Here is the most universal of enemies; none can deny; none can escape. Not shelter, not friends, not long life could shield the peaceful poet.

Before personal losses came, the lines were drawn. On the one side stood the youth, sensitive, high-strung; on the other lurked the fact of death, the common enemy. Tennyson's first feeling was horror; he caught glimpses of a black truth; his mind dwelt on the physical, revolting aspects of the end of life. Into the eyes of the beast in the shambles come panic and woe; into the heart of the youth who first scents mortality spring fear and loathing. "More than once Alfred . . . went out through the black night, and threw himself on a grave in the churchyard, praying to be beneath the sod himself." "He passed through moods of misery unutterable—when in London for the first time one of these moods came over him, as he realized that 'in a few years all its inhabitants would be lying horizontal, stark and stiff in their coffins.'"

The foe moves in Tennyson's earlier poems:—

His sockets were eyeless, but in them slept
 A red infernal glow
 As the cockroach crept, and the white fly leapt
 About his hairless brow.

This driver of *The Coach of Death*, chattering with fleshless jaws, is a pasteboard phantom, but a more genuine spectre soon appears. The *Juvenilia*, with their *Deserted House*; their *Dirge*; their lament, *All Things Will Die*; their refrain, "The grave i' the earth so chilly"; are full of a melancholy presence. The poet does not rise above the shadow, but dwells there, caught in the contemplation of the sensual horror of dissolution. The worm is always at its work:—

In the dark we must lie.
 Hark! death is calling,
 The jaw is falling,
 The red cheek paling,
 The strong limbs failing;
 Ice with the warm blood mixing;
 The eyeballs fixing.
 Nine times goes the passing bell;

 And at the burial to hear
 The creaking cords which wound and eat
 Into my human heart, whene'er
 Earth goes to earth
 before the heavy clod
 Weighs on me, and the busy fret
 Of that sharp-headed worm begins
 In the gross blackness underneath

 Nothing but the small cold worm
 Fretteth thine enshrouded form.

The *Volume of 1833* and the *Lover's Tale*, written at this time, acknowledge the same presence:—

Know I not Death? the outward signs?
 I found him when my years were few;
 A shadow on the graves I knew,
 And darkness in the village yew.
 From grave to grave the shadow crept:
 In her still place the morning wept:
 Touched by his feet the daisy slept.

The simple senses crowned his head :
 "Omega! thou art Lord," they said,
 "We find no motion in the dead."

"Death drew nigh and beat the doors of life"; "the Power. . . .
 from whose left hand floweth the Shadow of Death, perennial." The sufferer cries,—

Would I had lain
 Until the plaited ivy-tress had wound
 Round my worn limbs, and the wild brier had driven
 Its knotted thorns thro' my unpaining brows

 and the gilded snake
 Had nestled in this bosom-throne of Love.

He is haunted by phantoms, by "the hollow tolling of the bell,
 and all the vision of the bier." In the sequel the time comes
 when he is —

kneeling there
 Down in the dreadful dust that once was man,
 Dust, as he said, that once was loving hearts.

Though some of the phrases are dramatic, they do not lose their significance. In later life Tennyson said, "I have written what I have felt and known, and I will never write anything else"; and again, "poets and novelists, however dramatic they are, give themselves in their works." The moods of this lyric-period are Tennyson's own moods. He has searched into the loathly time beyond the hour of burial, he has pried into the vital secrets of the grave, and brought back horror and loathing.

The shadow which had passed across Tennyson's fancy was to fall across his heart, and years of silence were to ensue. Following the death of his father in 1831 came Hallam's death in 1833. There was now no abstraction; now was the time of the major struggle. It was a dark period. In 1838, say his son's *Memoirs*, the current of his mind ran constantly in the channel of mournful memories and melancholy forebodings; "so severe a hypochondria set in upon him that his friends despaired of his life." In *Memoriam* was written in these years, and in it are the traces of dark hours. But since it expresses not only doubt and despair but also faith and hope, it marks the close, as well as the course, of the conflict.

In the poetry that appeared meanwhile, death was no longer the skeleton in the closet of life. It was present in manifold shapes; now pitiful, now tragic, now releasing, but no longer merely horrible. Though the sharp-headed worm had ceased to haunt Tennyson's fancy, he had not come to a settled view of mortality. He was in a debatable land, where death had almost as many guises as it had entrances.

First, in the volume of 1842, comes the *Morte d'Arthur*, in which, though Arthur's mind is clouded with a doubt, he dreams at least of passing to a healing island of Avilion. Then St. Simeon Stylites draws to his end, struck with no fear or horror, but full of the thought of the fate of his work on earth. After him Ulysses speaks — Ulysses, to whose Greek mind "death closes all," but to whom comes a gleam,—

It may be we shall touch the Happy Isles,
And see the great Achilles.

As though to limn more sharply these three portraits of those who are about to die, stands Tithonus, whom "cruel immortality consumes." To him bitterly lamenting it seems that men who have the power to die are blessed, and he longs for "the grassy barrows of the happier dead."

St. Agnes' Eve reveals a woman exalted at the thought that death is near. To her it is the hoped-for end, the calling to the reward for a lifetime of devotion. Contrasted with this uplifted spirit is the pathetic Edward Gray, for whom the grave of Ellen Adair forms also the tomb of his own hopes. In the first poem is felt the joy of death for one whose life is not of this world; in the second its pity for one who through it loses that which is most dear to him.

There is almost a return to the youthful fear and loathing in *The Vision of Sin*, with its hysterical outburst:—

Fill the cup and fill the can :
Have a rouse before the morn :
Every moment dies a man,

Trooping from their mouldy dens
The chap-fallen circle spreads :
Welcome, fellow-citizens,
Hollow hearts and empty heads!

You are bones, and what of that?
Every face, however full,
Padded round with flesh and fat
Is but modell'd on a skull.

Death is king, and Vivat Rex!

The same vision of the sequel of dissolution that haunted the youth appears in the lines —

Below were men and horses pierced with worms,
And slowly quickening into lower forms;
By shards and scurf of salt, and scum of dross.

The final note in the volume of 1842 is the lyric *Break, Break, Break*, with its cry—

. . . . for the touch of a vanished hand,
And the sound of a voice that is still.

There is, then, no prophet speaking in this volume, but only a man in whose fancy death takes many shapes.

The Princess, 1847, with all its interest in the living problems of man and his relation to woman, does not look beyond the earthly latter end. In Lyric VI, to be sure,—

Home they brought her warrior dead,—

but the pathos of that loss yields to resolution.

Some of these poems, though they came later than *In Memoriam* in composition, seem to be the product of that central period of fluctuation, of questioning, of alternate doubt and hope, which occupied the years of Tennyson's life following the death of Hallam. *In Memoriam*, also the product of that time, reflecting not only the ebb and flow of faith, but the view of life and death, which is to color the poet's later days and work, records the chief shock of the long struggle, and the issue.

The problems of death, life, and immortality are the material of the poem. Here experience forces Tennyson beyond the grave; throughout the poem the dead are looked upon as living; whether, as sometimes, Tennyson fears that this view is self-delusion, or whether, as finally, he fully accepts it. In the poem may be found clear expression of that horror of and recoiling from death which darkened Tennyson's early work, and of that calm and founded faith which shone through his later poems. It marks each step of the passage from grief and despair to hope

and faith. Thus many passages dwell, as did the youth, on dreadful or pitiful aspects of death:—

Old Yew, which graspest at the stones
That name the under-lying dead,
Thy fibres net the dreamless head,
Thy roots are wrapt about the bones.

There sat the Shadow fear'd of man :

Who spread his mantle dark and cold,
And wrapt thee formless in the fold,
And dull'd the murmur on thy lip.

... somewhere in the waste
The Shadow sits and waits for me.

The cheeks drop in ; the body bows ;
Man dies : nor is there hope in dust.

For tho' my nature rarely yields
To that vague fear implied in death
Nor shudders at the gulfs beneath,
The howlings from forgotten fields ;

Yet oft when sundown skirts the moor
An inner trouble I behold,
A spectral doubt which makes me cold,—

Then there is the strife and the victory:—

... not in vain,
Like Paul with beasts, I fought with Death.
He fought his doubts and gather'd strength,
He would not make his judgment blind,
He faced the spectres of the mind
And laid them : thus he came at length
To find a stronger faith his own.

Finally comes the full rejoicing at the new mood, the accepted hope:—

... immortal Love ...
Thou madest Death ; and lo, thy foot
Is on the skull which thou hast made.
We ceased : a gentler feeling crept
Upon us : surely rest is meet :
"They rest," we said, "their sleep is sweet,"—

I wage not any feud with Death
For changes wrought on form and face;
No lower life that earth's embrace
May breed with him, can fright my faith.

. . . . those we call the dead
Are breathers of an ampler day
For ever nobler ends.

. . . . the grave
That has to-day its sunny side.
To-day the grave is bright for me.

In the crucible of grief had been refined a strong support for the rest of life. To a spirit with faith death wore a gentler visage; not in vain, "like Paul with beasts," had the poet fought. This was the outcome of the struggle that was at its keenest in the years following Hallam's death, and in the new light in which he walked the man's message began to sound the depths and scale the heights.

Now began the years of peace, inaugurated by the year 1850, when the laureateship brought outer reward and the union with Emily Sellwood inner happiness. "The peace of God came into my life," he said, "before the altar when I wedded her." These peaceful years, four decades of them, made up the third and last period in his work,—the time of calm after storm.

The calmness did not come because death no longer touched Tennyson. The shaft of Hallam's passing was not the last sharp blow launched against him. In 1851 his first son was stillborn, in 1865 his mother died, in 1879 his favorite brother Charles, in 1866 his son Lionel. Moreover, friends fell fast about him—Henry Hallam in 1859, Clough and Godley in 1862, Stephen Rice in 1865, Sir John Simeon in 1870, Brookfield in 1874, Fitzgerald in 1883, Browning in 1889, and Allingham in 1890. The death of that first son was a piercing stroke. "If my latest born were to die to-night," he wrote in after years, "I do not think that I should suffer so much as I did, looking on that noble little fellow who had never seen the light." After the death of his brother Charles he was very much shaken, hearing perpetual ghostly voices. "The thought of Lionel's death," he said, "tears me to pieces—he was so full of promise and so

young." His distress was great at the death of Sir John Simeon, and at that of Browning. "So we fall, one by one," he said in 1862, and again in 1863, of Fitzgerald, he cried, "so many dead — and him the last." "Having lost almost all my youthful contemporaries," he said in 1884, "I see myself, as it were, in an extra page of Holbein's 'Dance of Death,' and standing before the mouth of an open sepulchre, while the Queen hands me a coronet, and the skeleton takes it away, and points me downward into the darkness."

Thus if these were peaceful years, the peace had an inner source; it rose, not from outward circumstances, but from spiritual hope. Of a settled belief there are many hints. When his mother died, he wrote: "The departure of so blessed a being seems to have no sting in it. We all of us hate the pompous funeral we have to join in, black plumes, black coaches and nonsense. We should like all to go in white and gold rather." He spoke of the death of his friend Rice as a deliverance; he wrote to the widow of Brookfield: "I feel that the dead lives, whatever the pseudo-savants say." He thought much about religious matters, and often dwelt with great force on his intuitive conviction of immortality. In 1869 he said with passionate earnestness: "There are moments . . . when I feel and know the flesh to be the vision, God and the Spiritual the only real and true . . . you never can convince me that the *I* is not an eternal reality, and that the Spiritual is not the true and real part of me." In 1870, to a mother mourning for her son, he wrote: "The son . . . is not really what we call dead, but more actually living than when alive here . . . a separation for an hour, not an eternal farewell." When Fitzgerald died Tennyson wrote that he had not "passed into the deeper night . . . but into a clearer day than our poor twilight dawn on earth." In his lines sent to the Queen, in 1884, on the death of the Duke of Albany, he said: "The Death for which you mourn is Life": and again, in 1887, in his letter to the Queen, he spoke of the dead, "though silent, as being more living than the living." In the year of his death he said that "the life after death is the cardinal point of Christianity," and a visitor to him in that year wrote that he "seemed to love life and to have every reason to

love it—it was impossible to associate any thought of death with him.” “In his last days he had been talking to Dr. Dabbs about death, and about what a shadow this life is, and how men cling to what is after all but a small part of this great world’s life. He spoke to the Doctor . . . ‘Death?’ Dr. Dabbs bowed his head, and he said: ‘That’s well.’” His quiet end is familiar.

Of the poetic product of the four decades that began with Tennyson’s marriage and ended in that quiet moment, some part may have its roots in the soil of his earlier experiences. The *Idylls*, though they fall mostly in these years, do not belong as a whole to any single period of the poet’s life, and a few of the poems immediately following 1850, such as *Maud* and the *Sailor Boy*, echo the old horror:—

I see the place where thou wilt lie.
The sands in yeasty surges mix
In caves about the dreary bay,
And on thy ribs the limpet sticks
And in thy heart the scrawl shall play.
Dead, long dead,
Long dead!
And my heart is a handful of dust.
And the wheels go over my head,
And my bones are shaken with pain.

In the *Idylls* there are presented the ends of the lives of Balin and Balan, of Elaine, and of Arthur himself. The two brothers die locked in each other’s arms, Balin crying that his doom was dark in this world and will be dark in the next; Balan cheerful with the thought: “it will be good morrow there.” Elaine dies broken-hearted, but gentle in death as in life. Arthur passes, not into night, but “to be king among the dead, perchance to come again.” After the black boat has borne him across the water, there come —

Sounds, as if some fair city were one voice
Around a king returning from his wars.

Arthur does not now pass into darkness with only the vague hope of a vague Avilion in his spirit—he actually vanishes into light, as the new sun brings the new year. The picture changes

from the glimmer of hope all overcast with gloom of the *Morte d'Arthur*, to a shadow of pity all illumined with faith.

Two other passages in the *Idylls* may be significant. One describes Merlin when a great melancholy fell on him, and he saw —

World-war of dying flesh against the life,
Death in all life, and lying in all love,
The meanest having power upon the highest,
And the high purpose broken by the worm.

In the other, near the end of *Gareth and Lynette*, Gareth charges the last and most fearsome knight, standing clothed in black arms, with white breast-bone and barren ribs of Death. When Gareth splits the skull of the enemy and cleaves the helm, there appears the bright face of a blooming boy. Death faced proves only a phantom horror, is only a shell that conceals life. But these are slight bits in the whole mosaic of the *Idylls*, in which action has usurped the place of reflection.

In Tennyson's dramas, too, action dominates. From *Queen Mary* in 1875 to *The Foresters* in 1892 they yield little to one who would read a philosophy between their lines.

In *Queen Mary*, to begin with, there is life, not death. When death is actually described, it is with a fleshly, nauseating objectivity:—

. . . . heretics
Fed with rank bread that crawled upon the tongue,
And putrid water, every drop a worm,
Until they died of rotted limbs; and then
Cast on the dunghill naked, and become
Hideously alive again from head to heel,
Made even the carrion-nosing mongrel vomit
With hate and horror.

This is no subtle psychological loathing, it is downright brutal frankness — of the hand and eye — not of the mind and spirit. There is no thought of death, save as a means of policy, from "the acrid wine that Luther brewed," or as the passing away in peace of her who never knew peace.

In *Harold* death comes on the field of battle, illumined by courage and devotion. Harold dies for England, calm, feeling that there is no nobler end, that he has done no man wrong; but

also with the defiant cry, born of his tricked and troubled past, that he cannot fall into a falser world.

Becket reaches its catastrophe in the killing of the archbishop, who meets his fate upright, with full faith in the hereafter,—

First of the foremost of their files, who die
For God, to people heaven in the great day
When God makes up his jewels.

Into the hands of the Lord he commends his spirit, and passes as he has lived, soldier of the church, lover of the vision of her might.

In *The Cup*, the picture of a Roman death, pagan though it is, is touched with the light of a longing for the blessed isles. To Camma it seems that she perceives Sinnatus waiting for her beneath an ever-rising sun—a moment not unlike that which closes the *Idylls*.

The Promise of May ends melodramatically with the death of Eva, the remorse of Edgar, and the ruin of many lives by him because he has lost his faith, because he has been seized—

With some fierce passion, not so much for Death
As against Life! all, all into the dark—
No more!

As in the epic, then, so in these plays, Tennyson does not pause for philosophizing: things move on. This cannot be simply because he is using the dramatic form. Another and a greater than he found time to speculate in his dramas on that undiscovered country, and to wonder what dreams might come. It is the more striking that in Tennyson's plays, the product of a mature period when, perhaps, the human mind is most apt to turn to mortuary thoughts, death is only a factor in the action, like love or hate or lust or policy; that there is no speculation, no dwelling upon it. The poet's eyes are turned to this world, not the next.

But if the dramas show the ageing poet reading the book of life, not death, there are many lyrics and occasional poems that reveal him delving in that other volume which in youthful days had been so dark to him. That darkness is now gone. The *Wellington Ode*, in 1852, strikes, perhaps, the opening chord of the new motive. In the solemn ceremonial of the burial,—

Uplifted high in heart and hope are we,
 Until we doubt not that for one so true,
 There must be other nobler work to do.
 and we believe him
 Something far advanced in state,
 And that he wears a truer crown
 Than any wreath that man can weave him.

The hero is not last seen in the dust, but in the hands of God,—

And in the vast cathedral leave him.
 God accept him, Christ receive him.

In *The Ancient Sage* again there is the same mood, a mood that Tennyson had felt at the time of his mother's death:—

I hate the black negation of the bier,
 And wish the dead, as happier than ourselves,
 And higher, having climbed one step beyond
 Our village miseries, might be borne in white,
 To burial or to burning, hymned from hence
 With songs in praise of death, and crown'd with flowers.

How different is this from that youthful outburst:—

 at a burial to hear
 The creaking cords which wound and eat
 Into my human heart, whene'er
 Earth goes to earth.

The earlier loathing is gone. In *The Sisters* the wife's death means the joining in and beyond the grave of the one she loved; in *Emmie* the child's death means that the Lord of the children has heard her and that she has passed from suffering into peace; in *De Profundis* man is conceived as moving from death to death through life and life, and finding himself ever nearer and nearer the Maker; "the shell must break before the bird can fly," says *The Ancient Sage*, and "Let be thy wail and help thy fellow-men."

Locksley Hall Sixty Years After is like an epilogue to the earlier poem, a comment by one now wiser in his own generation:—

Wiser there than you, that crowning barren Death as lord of all
 Deem this over-tragic drama's closing curtain is the pall.

Likewise in the Epilogue to the *Charge of the Heavy Brigade*, Tennyson believes that —

The man remains, and whatsoe'er
He wrought of good or brave
Will mould him thro' the cycle year
That dawns behind the grave.

To his own brother, though he is silent under ground, and over him streams the rain, he writes:—

True poet, surely to be found
When Truth is found again.

Of the same strain are the many epitaphs that the laureate composed. With the tribute to the earthly deeds of the great stands the same affirmation that they live in the hearts of men and beyond the grave.

In the volume of 1889, *Demeter and Other Poems*, there is written most plainly the poet's acceptance of mortality:—

. . . . To question, why
The sons before the father die,
Not mine! and I may meet him soon.

Vastness, after all the murmur and questioning, closes with the same docile note:—

Peace, let it be! for I loved him, and love him for ever:
the dead are not dead but alive.

This submission is as Germanic as the earlier revolt against the reality of death was Celtic.

The Leper's Bride enforces the actuality of the spirit and the insubstantiality of the flesh, that truth on which Tennyson, in conversation, so often insisted. The wall of flesh that comes between the leper's soul and his bride's "will vanish and give place to the beauty that endures." In such a poem as this there is no blinking of the truth, no shunning of the physical facts,—

The fairest flesh at last is filth on which the worm will feast.

"The body is a poor rib-grated dungeon a coarse diseased thing a Satan-haunted ruin, a little city of sewers," and yet she, who loved the leper first when he was young and fair, loves him now the most. It is in the harsh face of life, in Stevenson's phrase, that Tennyson reads his bracing gospel. Merlin sees —

That under the Crosses
The dead man's garden,
The mortal hillock
Would break into blossom.

It is this brighter vision of the grave that lights the last poems of Tennyson. *Crossing the Bar* is a song not of far-travelling into unknown lands but of home-faring, and in *God and the Universe* he addresses his own soul when he says,—

Spirit, nearing yon dark portal at the limit of thy human state,
Fear not thou the hidden purpose of that Power which alone is great,
Nor the myriad world, His shadow, nor the silent Opener of the Gate.

Finally, *To the Mourners* his word is,—

The toll of funeral in an Angel ear
Sounds happier than the merriest marriage bell.
The face of Death is toward the Sun of Life.

If to grow old and to cease meant such a vision of the end to Tennyson, who shall say that the poet had not faced death and laid that spectre of the mind? In youth there was in him a loathing for it; in manhood a question and a challenge; in age an acceptance: in youth it was for him a shadow; in manhood a black reality; in age a gleam that did not fail. He began in questioning and in fear; he fought his way darkling; he reached sunlit spaces. To the poet, we hold, surer vision is given—vision of the true as of the beautiful: the scales have fallen from his eyes and he is to mankind prophet and seer. If this be so, we may take heart that Tennyson, who in his vision had journeyed far, returned a prophet of good tidings, that in his discovered land—

The face of Death is toward the Sun of Life.

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